

A Pattern of History: What Quilts Reveal

The Materials and Techniques of American Quilts and Coverlets

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Early American colonists and artisans, originally from Europe, brought to the New World their own craft traditions centered primarily around the use of linen and wool (22.55). These familiar choices were adapted to the colonies, whose climate and environment enabled the introduction and raising of sheep for wool and, in some areas—though with less success—the growing of flax for linen. The cultivation of silk—an exotic fiber originally brought from China—was attempted, but short-lived, in the northern states, although silk was used extensively by the nineteenth century (1983.349). Cotton thrived in the southern region, but was restricted to small-scale home production until the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the invention of new mechanical equipment, including the cotton gin, special carding (for fiber preparation) and spinning tools, and new loom technologies facilitated its harvesting, spinning, and weaving on a large scale.

Quilts and coverlets were created from both homemade and commercially produced cloth. During the early colonial period and into the new republic, most commercial fabric was imported from England. Even goods that originated in foreign regions, such as the popular dye-printed calicoes from India and woven silks from China, were brought into the colonies via English ships. These were used in making quilts and also influenced American quilt design (1970.288; 38.59). By the mid-nineteenth century, most of the fabrics found in quilts were industrially produced and reflected the taste and achievements of the American textile industry. Specialty fabrics—particularly silk ribbons like those used in the Signature quilt (1996.4)—became popular by the second half of the nineteenth century.



Elizabeth Van Horne Clarkson American, ca. 1830, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Colors, Dyes, and the Dyeing Process in America

Prior to the development of synthetic dyes in the nineteenth century, early American dyers utilized natural dyes, derived from a variety of plants and animals, to create a wide-ranging color palette. Red colors ranged from the orange-red hue produced from the madder root (*Rubia tinctoria*) (56.113) to the brilliant scarlet made from cochineal (*Dactylopius coccus*), the scale insect that grows on cactus from Central and South America (22.55). Most of the blue colors were from indigo leaves (*Indigofera tinctoria*), and browns derived from a variety of sources, including tannins found in galls and oak trees.

Numerous shades of color could be achieved by the dyers, depending on the quality of the dyes, the purity of water, the type of utensils used (a copper kettle, for example, could affect the color), and the addition of specific mordants, or metallic salts, used to fix the dye to the fiber in order to create a strong, lightfast color. Mordants included alum, iron, copper, tin, and chrome, and, along with other additives to the dyebath, such as cream of tartar, vinegar, or ash, were essential to the dyeing process.

The dyeing of textiles with natural dyes was both an art and a science. Indigo blue, for example, with its complex chemistry, required a series of steps to reduce and oxidize the dyestuff, in order to produce the durable, lightfast blue color. Turkey Red was another complicated dye process. Originating in India to produce madder red dye on cotton fabric, Turkey Red was a method that involved a sequence of immersions of the cloth into oils, milkfats, and dung, among other materials (1974.24). Toward the end of the eighteenth century, books were published on the science and philosophy of dyes, thus

heralding a period of experimentation for the creation and use of a whole new category of synthetic dyes that flourished at the end of the nineteenth century and continue to be used today.

Printing Techniques for Quilts and Coverlets

Many techniques were employed for printing the fabrics used in American quilts. Apart from the dyeing of yarns or whole cloths with a single color by immersing the fabric into cauldrons of hot dyebaths, methods of applying designs onto the surface of fabrics ranged from hand-painting and stenciling to block, copperplate, roller, resist, and discharge printing.

Block printing involved the use of carved wooden blocks, whose surfaces were “inked” with dye thickened with gum arabic or other starchy substances and pressed directly onto the cloth. Some appliquéd quilts (38.59; 1970.288; 2005.284) were made with floral designs from block-printed fabrics. Etched plates of copper were also used for printing, and in 1783 technological developments led to sheathing cylindrical rollers with etched copperplates for continuous printing, called roller printing (1985.347). This new technology enabled printers to produce more yardage at a much faster rate.

Construction of Quilts

The creation of complex quilts composed of many small pieces of cloth requires systematic organization. For constructing pieced quilts, a template might be used for creating the basic design unit, such as a square, diamond, or hexagon. The template—sometimes a heavy card or paper, or even newspaper—ensured an even, regular unit size, thus enabling the quilter to join together the many pieces of fabric, following an overall design arrangement (1996.4). Appliquéd quilts, also made by using fabric pieces, were constructed in a different manner. Appliqué is a versatile technique, enabling the sewer to compose visual patterns with multiple layers of solid-color and printed fabrics, creating depth and play in the overall composition (1974.24).

Woven Design and Structure in American Coverlets

American woven blankets and coverlets range from handmade to industrially woven products. Simple weaves, such as plain weave, twills, float weaves (often referred to as “summer and winter” due to their color contrasts) (10.125.410), and certain doublecoths were woven on simple looms (67.33). Creating designs in geometric patterning resulted from a weaver’s meticulous attention to the loom capabilities, along with the artistic use of contrasting colors and materials to highlight the pattern effects. Floral and larger-scale pictorial images generally required more complex patterning mechanisms. The Jacquard mechanism, developed by French weaver Joseph Marie Jacquard (31.124) in the late eighteenth century, utilized a series of pre-punched cards (made of carton perforated in patterns for particular designs) that would control the threads as woven on the loom. An early forerunner of the computer, the Jacquard loom was introduced to American weavers by the 1820s and used extensively to produce woven coverlets with both large and small-scale designs (1988.127).

https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/mtqc/hd_mtqc.htm

Daughters of the American Revolution Museum

Sewn in America

Sewn objects surround us. They clothe us from birth, cover our bodies day and night, furnish our living spaces, line our coffins. For over 40,000 woman sitting at an 18th century sewing machine years humans have sewn by hand (and for a mere 180, by machine as well). Until recently, every woman and many men knew how to sew for utilitarian and often decorative purposes. Knowing a variety of techniques and stitches, and which to use for a given task, was key knowledge imparted in childhood and employed throughout a lifetime.

This groundbreaking exhibit combines sewn items from all textile sections of the DAR Museum’s collections: clothing, household textiles, quilts, and needlework. It examines the role sewing played both practically in American women’s lives, and in shaping gender roles, whether domestically or in professions from dressmaking and tailoring to factory work. Garments, quilts, and embroideries from the 18th century to today are juxtaposed to show how women of diverse backgrounds have used their needles to express emotions and identity and as a force for benevolence and justice.

<https://www.dar.org/museum/exhibitions/current-exhibition-1>

Click here to explore the DAR's Quilt Index: <https://quiltindex.org/results/?collection=DAR>

QUILT INDEX

QUILTS STORIES ARTISTS COLLECTIONS RESOURCES EPHEMERA ADD QUILTS ABOUT SEARCH DONATE

321 RESULTS FOR DAR

DOCUMENTATION PROJECTS MUSEUMS SPECIAL COLLECTIONS LEGACY PROJECTS

COMPARE SORT BY

1901-1929 ABC Quilt	1800-1849 Achsah Goodwin Wi...	1800-1849 Album Fish, Emma M.	1800-1849 Album Quilt Suman, Agnes	1800-1849 Album Quilt	1800-1849 Album Quilt	1850-1875 Baltimore Album
1850-1875 Baltimore Album	1850-1875 Baltimore Album Wissler, Carmelia E...	1850-1875 Baltimore Album	1850-1875 Baltimore Album Q...	1850-1875 Baltimore Album Q...	1930-1949 Birds of a feathe... Parker, Blanche Ran...	1800-1849 Broken Dishes Allen, Joanne
1930-1949 Broken Star	1930-1949 Bud and Blossom	Pre-1799 Calimanco	1876-1900 Centennial quilt Fretzlen, Arkansas ...	1800-1849 Center Square Ewing, Martha	1800-1849 Chained Five Patc...	1876-1900 Chained Nine Patc...

The Virginia Quilt Museum

The mission of the Virginia Quilt Museum is to cultivate and preserve the quilting arts in Virginia. Founded in 1995, The Virginia Quilt Museum is the Official Quilt Museum of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Nestled in the heart of the picturesque Shenandoah Valley, the Museum promotes a unique blend of art and cultural heritage. With three floors of gallery space the museum celebrates the beauty of quilts through exhibitions that change at least three times a year. Historical, modern, art, and traditional quilts are featured simultaneously, allowing visitors the opportunity to explore the variety of styles, techniques, themes, and artistry found in quilts. Along with exhibitions VQM offers an array of programs and events. Programs include topics such as beginning quilting classes, lectures on historical quilts, and workshops to make a table runner or mini quilt.

<https://www.vaquiltmuseum.org/about-2/about-us>

Sacred Threads Traveling Exhibit

Sacred Threads is an exhibition of quilts exploring themes of joy, inspiration, spirituality, healing, grief and peace/brotherhood. This biennial exhibition was established to provide a safe venue for quilters who see their work as a connection to the sacred and/or as an expression of their spiritual journey. The objective is to create a dignified exhibition of artwork that touches on both spiritual and personal levels for all those who view it. We want to share with others the experiences of quilters whose stories may be a source of healing and strength.

<https://www.vaquiltmuseum.org/service/sacred-threads-traveling-exhibition>



Pink Coleus by Susan Brubaker Knapp

AQSG Mini Medallions

The Virginia Quilt Museum is honored to host this exhibit from the American Quilt Study Group (AQSG). This exhibit is a collection of quilts from the AQSG 2021 Quilt Study challenge. The AQSG Quilt Study challenges members to learn the history of an individual quilt by selecting one that addresses a specified design, style, or period, and then make a small replica or interpretation of the historic quilt. These quilts are no larger than 42" x 42". Framed Center/Medallion Quilts was the study theme for the 2021 challenge. These quilts cover a time period ranging from the early 19th century to the mid-20th century. Join us as we take a deeper look at the history of these medallions.

<https://www.vaquiltmuseum.org/service/aqsg-mini-medallions>



Quilt by Annette Burgess

Frontier Culture Museum

In our Old World exhibits you can experience daily life in farm households in the 1600s and 1700s in England, Ireland, Germany, and West Africa. At the time of colonization, most of these countries had not formed yet. England was ruled by a monarch who also ruled Ireland and the American colonies. Germany was not a country, but a collection of over a thousand territories of various sizes within the Holy Roman Empire. West Africa had many kingdoms and a few large empires, but many of the region's numerous ethnic groups lived in their own self-governed villages and village groups.

Most people lived by farming, local trade, and skills such as spinning and weaving, blacksmithing, or wood-working. Their labor and available resources were dedicated to providing the needs of the household and meeting the obligations imposed upon them by their community, landlord, or ruler.



Success from one year to the next depended on the fertility of land, weather, local order and security, and the resourcefulness of household members. Bad weather, conflict, disease, injury or death were common setbacks. Recovery, if it came, was slow and difficult. This was especially true when hard times were spread over a wide area, affected many people, and lasted for an extended period.



Hardships in their homelands made it increasingly difficult for farmers to maintain their way of life. As prospects diminished in the Old World, the North American colonies experienced rapid growth and success. In England, Ireland, and Germany, the colonies were seen as places of opportunity, a place where good land was available at reasonable cost with few obligations to political authorities.

In the 1600s and 1700s, most West Africans had no direct contact with Europeans in their homelands, and knew nothing of the North American colonies. Starting in the 1500s, European slaver traders started to capture Africans and forcefully transported them across the Atlantic. They were brutally taken from their homelands and families to work in the colonies. The avarice of European merchants and governments created a demand for labor which was filled by enslaved Africans and later African Americans.

An extraordinary turn of events brought people born England, Ireland, Germany, and West Africa together on the frontier, where American Indians had lived for centuries. Over time, all of these different groups created American frontier culture, a distinct culture which to this day shapes American identity.

An Annotated Bibliography on American Quilt History

*note: there are many books on various periods, regions, designs, themes within this broad topic. Some are good and some are very iffy in their historic veracity. Many books focus more on how to make traditional quilts which is fine—in fact, many historians have had to include how-to projects in order to get published, but I'm more focused here on the history. I'm including books I know I can recommend, both surveys and topics related to what we'll be seeing on the trip.

Where these are available in local libraries I add that: D for DC, M=Montgomery, F=Fairfax, AR=Arlington, AX=Alexandria, P=PG County. Most are available to read (but not check out) in the DAR Museum's library (you can check at https://nsdar.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?vid=01DAR_INST:DAR). You are welcome to come to the DAR Mon-Sat (except last two weeks of June) to read them.

Surveys of American quilts, some are large tomes based on various museum collections:

Hearts and Hands: The Influence of Women and Quilts on American Society, Elaine Hedges et al. Though published in 1987, this small volume packed with images of quilts and of women quilting remains an excellent discussion of the significance of quilts in women's lives and in our history. Still available used, and a worthwhile investment if you are interested in the historical context and significance of quilts. ALSO made into a film which is at FCPL and MCPL (viewable online).

American Quilts in the Industrial Age, 1760-1870 (another volume for the Modern Age up to 1940), International Quilt Museum, based on their incredibly complete collection. Great intro essays by a variety of quilt scholars on each major type of quilt. If you want to invest in one large book that gives a rich and varied overview of the American quilt, this is probably the one to go for: it has the largest collection and covers the widest ground.

400 years of Quilts, Linda Baumgarten and Kim Ivey (Colonial Williamsburg collection).

Quilts: The Democratic Art, Robert Shaw. (AX, D) Not based on a collection, good overview.

The American Quilt, Roderick Kiracofe. (F, M, AX) Not based on a collection but a good overview.

Quilts in a Material World, Linda Eaton. (F) Winterthur collection, so not comprehensive (nothing later than mid-1800s), but brilliant exploration of stories of the women's lives and what we can learn about the textiles used, the textile industry in America at the time, rich social context. Wonderful example of how deeply old quilts can be researched and how much can be learned from them.

Fabric of a Nation: American Quilt Stories, Pamela Parmal et al. MFA Boston's recent exhibition catalog, not as comprehensive as the above but a beautifully done exhibit with quilts from 18th century to today. AR, D
For Purpose and Pleasure: Quilting Together in Nineteenth-Century America, Sandi Fox.

Local Regional Traditions

*The first three here are the publications from the statewide quilt documentation projects which recorded as many quilts as possible from each state. Each author is an expert in her area. Many state projects' records are in the online database of the Quilt Index, quiltindex.org.

Virginia Quilts, Hazel Carter. (F)

West Virginia Quilts and Quiltmakers: Echoes from the Hills, Fawn Valentine (F)

A Maryland Album: Quiltmaking Traditions, 1644-1934, Gloria Seaman Allen and Nancy Gibson Tuckhorn.

Eye on Elegance: Early Quilts of Maryland and Virginia, Alden O'Brien et al. Exhibit catalog from DAR Museum's exhibit in 2014, with guest essays and extended catalog entries on pre-1865 quilts in the DAR's collection with some additional loans from private collectors.

Southern Quilts, Mary Kerr. Focuses on many typical designs and color choices in Southern quilts, mostly c1870+.

African American and Native American quilt traditions:

Sewing and Survival: Native American Quilts from 1880-2022, Teresa Wong. An excellent recent publication.

To Honor and Comfort: Native American Quilting Traditions, Marsha MacDowell et al. Exhibit catalog some years back from Michigan State University, looks at many different nations' quilting traditions and interviews contemporary makers. MacDowell is chief curator there so you'll see her name in several other publications on this list.

Always there: The African-American Presence in American Quilts, Cuesta Benberry. (P) Benberry was the leading scholar on this topic and challenged many of the preconceptions and romantic inaccuracies surrounding African American quilts. She is more to be relied on than several other often cited books on this topic.

This I accomplish: Harriet Powers' Bible Quilt and Other Pieces, Kyra Hicks (free on Kindle Unlimited) Kyra Hicks is another highly reputable African American historian of African American quilts as well as a quilter herself. She's the leading expert on Harriet Powers's famous Bible quilts (both discussed in the Fabric of a Nation exhibit catalog).

And Still We Rise: Race, Culture, and Visual Conversations (D) also ***Spirits of the Cloth*** (D, M), Carolyn Mazloomi (one of her quilts is in the DAR exhibition, she has written many books on African American quilts)

An American Quilt: Unfolding a Story of Family and Slavery, Rachel May (AR, D, M) A white writer's exploration of a family quilt's history leads her to the story of the family's complicity in slavery.

Facts and Fabrications: Unraveling the History of Quilts and Slavery, Barbara Brackman (D, AX, M) Brackman knew and worked with Cuesta Benberry and is probably the leading scholar of quilt history.

Some books on themes in the DAR exhibit or related to the VQM exhibit

Threads of Life: A History of the World through the Eye of a Needle, Clare Hunter, 2019. (AR, M) not about quilts per se, but very readable and thought-provoking exploration of the many ideas that can be imbedded in or expressed by textiles/sewing/embroidering.

Quilts and Human rights, Marsha MacDowell (D)

Quilts and Health, Marsha MacDowell. Quilts' power to soothe and heal (occupational therapy research shows sewing is therapeutic), as well as quilts made by or for people undergoing treatment for medical conditions.

Why we Quilt: contemporary makers speak out: the power of art, activism, community, and creativity, Thomas Knauer (not personally familiar with this one) (AR, F, D, P)

Memories of Survival, Esther Nisenthal Krinitz and Bernice Steinhardt. (M, D, F) The DAR's exhibit features one of the 36 panels sewn by Esther Krinitz to chronicle how she and her sister survived the Nazi occupation of her Polish village. The related film ***Through the Eye of the Needle*** is a DVD available at AX. All the panels are visible, with short videos discussing each, at artandremembrance.org, as is the longer film.

Mend! A Refashioning Manual and Manifesto, Kate Sekules. (AX, AL, P, M, D) Many books on “visible mending” but Kate’s gives a historical background.

Some websites of interest:

Sacred Threads: Read more about this organization here: SACRED THREADS (sacredthreadsqilts.com)

Art and Remembrance.org: Esther Krinitz’s 36 fabric collage story panels

Quiltindex.org: searchable database of quilts, look for quilts by state, design, date range, and many other features. Includes many museum collections including the DAR’s (up through a couple of years ago), and many state documentation projects. Also many many pages about many different quilt topics and groups of quilts.

Read about Mary Gasperik and her quilts (one is in the DAR exhibition) at:

<https://quiltindex.org/view/view/?type=galleries&kid=18-121-42> (links to many different short articles)

International Quilt Museum in Lincoln, NE has a database to search for anything in their collection:

<https://www.internationalquiltmuseum.org/collections/search>

Some quilt myths are discussed at: <https://kora.quiltindex.org/files/51-149-31/WF34-Myths.pdf>

DAR Museum’s online collection database: <https://collections.dar.org/MASearch.aspx?dir=DARCOLL> nearly all our quilts and samplers/pictorial needleworks are online (a few still have to get better photos), including anything on view. Many of our dresses and some of our accessories (purses, shoes, fans, and a selection of others) also. Any object on view (or previously on view) will be online. We are working our way through the collection of over 20,000 objects, more being added all the time.

A few other museum collections with good online quilt collections: Williamsburg (emuseum.history.org), Metropolitan Museum (metmuseum.art/collection), Winterthur (www.winterthur.org/exhibitions-and-collections/museum/museum-collections/), Museum of Fine Arts (Boston) (mfa.org/collections), Philadelphia Museum of Art (<https://philamuseum.org/search?q=quilt>), American Folk Art Museum (collection.folkartmuseum.org/collections)

A Glossary of common quilt terms (with a historical, museum professional bent):

QUILT: strictly speaking, a quilt has three layers—top, filling, backing—which have QUILTING stitches going through all three layers to hold them together.

TOP: the upper layer which is more decorative.

FILLING: more commonly historical/museum term for batting. Generally the fiber will match the quilt: Wool filling for wool quilts, cotton for cotton ones. Silk quilts may have either, but seldom silk filling.

BACKING: often plain cotton but this varies regionally, and after factory-made cottons made prints affordable, many quilters started using printed backings.

BINDING: a separate strip of fabric may bind the edges, or the quilt may be SELF-BOUND by folding the back fabric onto the front, the front fabric onto the back (less common), or turning both into the inside in a KNIFE EDGE binding.

TIED: some quilts instead of being quilted, have thread or yarn TIES at intervals.

COUNTERPANE: a commonly used historical term for a non-quilted bedspread of one or two layers without filling or quilting, which may be patchwork, appliqué, embroidered, or whole cloth.

QUILT TOP: Used for an unfinished top layer of what may have been intended to be made into a quilt.

BEDSPREAD: this term comes in around mid-1800s and isn’t specific enough about what its components or design may be to be useful in a museum context.

COVERLET: English museums use this for what we would call a counterpane. Not useful in America because we use this term for the woven cotton and wool bedspreads that were widespread here but not in England.

SUMMER SPREAD: this is a term sometimes used for counterpanes, but as it's based on an unprovable assumption about use (an unquilted bedcovering could have simply been the top, decorative layer of many blankets!), it's not often used in museum contexts.

TYPES OF QUILT: main categories of design layout

WHOLECLOTH: all made of one fabric (can be stretched to include those with a contrasting border).

FRAMED MEDALLION (aka framed center, center medallion): the most popular layout, whether for pieced or appliqué quilts, c. 1790-1835. The center may be square, circular, rectangular, or oval and is surrounded by a series of borders, whether clearly defined (pieced or continuous appliqué vines, for example) or less so.

BLOCKS: After 1830, quilts made of rows and columns of individual blocks (the same or varied) came into fashion and soon dominated.

SASHING: rows of fabric separating blocks to create a grid are often found on block quilts. Sometimes double or triple rows of sashing are used (regional specialties).

CRAZY QUILT: 1880-1910 style of random pieces, each edged in embroidery, with a range of colors and stitches used, and selected pieces embellished with embroidery or paint. Almost never actually filled or quilted, sometimes tied. Many if not most are actually "contained crazies," that is, random pieces are made into square blocks which are sewn together.

ON POINT: can refer to either the pieced layout or grid quilting, when the medallion, border, or grid is arranged at a 90-degree angle rather than in horizontal/vertical alignment.

QUILT DESIGN TECHNIQUES:

PIECED (PATCHWORK): fabric is cut into desired shapes and sewn together, and this forms the quilt top.

APPLIQUÉ: fabric is cut into shapes and sewn onto the quilt top, arranged to make a design (flower, wreath, etc.).

REVERSE APPLIQUÉ: the quilt top is cut out and the appliqué pieces are inserted underneath the quilt top; the top's cut edges are folded underneath and stitched to the appliqué fabrics.

FOUNDATION PIECING: fabric pieces are folded over paper templates, basted (stitched with large stitches to hold them in place for careful stitching), and stitched edge-to-edge. Hexagon and crazy quilts are the more common examples of this technique, which is rarely used otherwise. The paper is not always removed afterwards.

INLAID: heavy wool quilts which can't easily be hemmed will have pieces sewn edge to edge so they lie flat next to each other without a seam allowance. Not a common technique in the USA.

TYPES OF QUILTING: common treatments/designs

STUFFED WORK: the more historical term for what's now called trapunto, in which you stuff additional filling into certain areas after the quilting is finished, to accentuate those areas of the quilted design.

ECHO QUILTING: quilted around each motif in the quilt top (pieced or appliqué), often in concentric circles

STITCH IN THE DITCH: quilting along the seams of the piecing of the quilt top.

OUTLINE QUILTING: quilted just inside the pieces.

BRODERIE PERSE: a Victorian term having nothing to do with Persian embroidery. In early chintz appliqué quilts, when the chintzes' edges are too complex to fold under, they are left raw and instead sewn to the quilt top with a continuous, tightly-placed row of buttonhole stitches around the edge. (Chintz appliqué is often generally called broderie perse even if this stitching is not used, but strictly speaking it refers to the buttonhole-stitched edging.)

Clamshell, fan, grid, diamond, parallel lines: five of the most common background quilting patterns, sometimes done over the whole quilt but not terribly often.